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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of mothers' working status on their college student child's current attitudes toward maternal employment. This study attempted to find an explanation for the finding from previous research that female college students whose mothers were employed during their childhood reported that they would have been happier if their mother's work status had been different while they were growing up. Findings from 112 male and 136 female college students who ranged in age from 17-36 years, revealed that the students' self-esteem and current happiness were related to maternal employment status during early childhood. There was a trend for females whose mothers were employed full- or part-time during their early childhood to report that they felt threatened by their mothers' work accomplishments. The findings suggest an indirect relationship between maternal employment and current levels of happiness and self-esteem. There is a need for future research to address the way in which internal pressures to succeed affect adolescent women. (NB)

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Adult Daughters of Working Mothers: Supermom Juniors?

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March 23, 1993

Abstract

This study investigated the effects of students' mothers' working status on their current attitudes toward maternal employment. Based on the results of a previous study, this study attempted to find an explanation for the finding that female college students whose mothers were employed during their childhood reported that they would have been happier if their mothers' work status had been different while they were growing up. Subjects' self esteem and current happiness was related to maternal employment status during early childhood. There was a trend for females whose mothers were employed full- or part-time during their early childhood to report that they felt threatened by their mothers' work accomplishments.

Introduction

There has been considerable debate over whether maternal employment is beneficial or detrimental for children. Over the years many researchers have postulated global negative cognitive, academic, emotional and self-esteem repercussions of maternal employment. To date, nearly four decades of work has failed to affirm the majority of pessimistic predictions about the children of employed women. Most studies have found very few differences between children grouped on the basis of maternal work status (Hoffman, 1989).

A large body of research has attempted to delineate the impact of maternal employment on children. Although the literature contains hundreds of studies on young children, there have been relatively few investigations using young adult samples. Such investigations are important because they permit an assessment of the long-term effects of maternal employment. In the present study, the attitudes and expectations of young women whose mothers were employed during their childhoods were compared with those of women whose own mothers had not been employed.

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Method

Subjects:

The subjects used in this study were 250 college students. The sample consisted of 112 men and 136 women who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania. The subjects ranged in age from 17 to 36 years of age.

Procedure:

The packet used in this study was handed out to subjects in the introductory psychology class in which they were enrolled. Subjects were asked if they would fill out the packet in its entirety. Ample time was given to the subjects to complete the questionnaire packet. The packet used in this study consisted of four different parts.

In part one, subjects were asked to provide demographic information and to answer questions concerning their career and family expectations. These questions required subjects to disclose information concerning their expectations about family plans, job type, job characteristics, and work preference based on the age of their youngest child. Subjects were also asked 10 question concerning their attitudes toward their mother and father. These questions required subjects to indicate their degree of agreement with each statement on a 4-point Likert scale.

Part two of the packet was made up of the BACMEC questionnaire (Greenberger et al. 1988). The BACMEC is a 24-item scale developed to measure Beliefs About the Consequences of Maternal Employment for Children. The BACMEC included beliefs about both benefits (13 items) and costs (11 items). Studies of five samples (n=375) have demonstrated that the total BACMEC scale and its subscales are highly reliable and have good convergent, divergent, and concurrent validity (Greenberger et al. 1988).

In part three of the packet, subjects were asked to disclose information about their mother's work status as each stage of development. The stages of development were infancy (birth to 1 1/2 years old), preschool (2 to 5 years old), childhood (6 to 12 years old), and adolescence (13 to 18 years old). The subjects were asked to report whether their mothers were employed part-time, full-time, or not employed outside the home during each stage of development. Subjects also disclosed information about their mother's job, indicating whether it was professional, white collar, or blue collar work. Subjects were also asked to indicate whether or not they had been raised in a single parent household.

Part four of the packet consisted of the CAS, the Childhood Appraisal Scale (Chambliss, Owens, & Carr, 1991). The CAS is an 18-item questionnaire designed to measure the subject's perception of the consequences of their mother's work status. The subjects were asked to rate each item on a scale from 1 to 4 depending on how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each statement. The statements permitted subjects to indicate if they felt their lives would have been different if their mother's work status had been different when they were growing up. This allowed an assessment of the perceived impact of full-time and part-time maternal

employment, as well as unemployment.

Part five of the packet consisted of five questions to which only the females were directed to respond. These questions were designed to measure perceived parental career expectations and standards for their daughters. The questions required subjects to indicate their degree of agreement with each statement on a four-point Likert scale.

Results

Subjects were divided into three maternal employment status groups on the basis of maternal work status during their early childhood (infancy: 0 to 1 1/2 years; preschool: 2 to 5 years). Maternal work status was categorized as either full-time employment (FT), part-time employment (PT), or not employed. Male subjects and individuals from single parent households were excluded for the purposes of these analyses. Oneway ANOVA were performed to assess differences among subjects based on maternal work status during early childhood. For the correlational analyses, the subjects were divided into two groups, those whose mothers' were employed during infancy and preschool (early childhood) and those whose mothers' weren't employed at all during early childhood.

Group comparisons revealed no significant differences among the three maternal employment status groups (FT, PT, and no employment) on the majority of the childhood appraisal items, regardless of the developmental interval being considered. Across the infant and preschool age periods, there were no significant differences among the full-time employment, part-time employment, and no employment groups in subjects' quality of life, success, freedom, social ease and intelligence. There were also no differences in perceptions that maternal work status had affected participation in extracurricular activities at school (sports and clubs) or family financial problems.

However, maternal employment status during both infancy and the preschool years was significantly associated with both subjects' self esteem and current happiness. Females whose mothers were employed full-time or part-time were more likely to report feeling that they would like themselves better if their mothers' work status had been different while they were growing up (FT $x=1.82$, $s.d=.65$, $n=23$; PT $x=1.55$, $s.d.=.57$, $n=29$) than those whose mothers were not employed ($x=1.43$, $s.d.=.56$, $n=82$; F 3.97, $d.f.= 2$, $p< .05$).

Females whose mothers' were employed were also significantly more likely to say that they would be a happier person now if their mothers' work status had been different while they were growing up (FT $x=1.82$, $s.d.=.65$, $n=23$; PT $x=1.53$, $s.d.=.62$, $n=30$) than those whose mothers' weren't employed ($x=1.39$, $s.d.=.54$, $n=81$; F 5.00, $d.f.=2$, $p<.01$).

There was a significant negative correlation for females whose mothers' were employed during early childhood between the tendency to blame poor self esteem on maternal employment and the subjects' feeling that in their work they will live up to their mothers' expectations. ($r=-.62$, $p<.01$, $n=22$). Those attributing self esteem problems to maternal employment were less likely to believe they

would eventually fulfill their mothers' expectations.

There was also a significant positive correlation for females whose mothers' were employed during early childhood between scores on the self esteem attribution item and the tendency to feel threatened by mothers' work accomplishments ($r=.64$, $p<.001$, $n=22$).

Results also showed that for females whose mothers' were employed during early childhood, there was a positive correlation between blaming unhappiness on maternal employment and feeling threatened by their mothers' work accomplishments ($r= .46$, $n=22$, n.s.).

Discussion

These results suggest an indirect relationship between maternal employment and current levels of happiness and self esteem. One possible explanation for this is that the subjects whose mothers were employed felt greater pressure to excel in the working world because their mothers had performed well. The correlations between the self esteem and happiness items and the items tapping mothers' expectations and feeling threatened by mothers' work accomplishments suggest that these perceived performance pressures may be leading the subjects to blame their current unhappiness and low self esteem on the working status of their mothers during their early childhood. It is possible that these negative consequences of maternal employment might be attenuated by efforts to reduce excessive pressures on daughters to excel.

Many mothers feel that they are presenting a positive role model for their daughters by being employed. According to the results of this current study, some daughters are viewing their mothers work status as stressful for themselves. The internal pressure that daughters may feel needs to be taken into consideration. The degree to which these internal pressures effects the daughters has not been assessed. Perceived feelings f competition with a working mother's employment legacy may in fact be positive for adolescent females. It may be a driving force that leads them to accomplish many difficult tasks.

There is a need for future research to address the way in which internal pressures to succeed affect these adolescent females. The current study assessed subjects perceived feelings of self-esteem and happiness. Perhaps it would be helpful to include tested, reliable scales for true measures of self-esteem and happiness levels of subjects so that a direct objective comparison can be made between daughters of working mothers and non-working mothers regardless of subjects perceived feelings.

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